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ABSTRACT

This article described an experiment using group procedures as a means of training faculty members and student peer-helpers to conduct student advisement in a college setting with entering freshmen. Results suggested that the group process can assist in overcoming certain limitations of more traditional faculty-student advisement activities by expanding the range of topics and concerns dealt with, utilizing the group process as a partial substitute for professional counseling services, and providing a basic reference group in which students can share ideas, feelings and concerns before they become crises. Group advisement procedures were used as a method of integrating the student personnel and academic functions of the college for the overall benefit of student, faculty, and student personnel administrators. (Author)

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GROUP INTERACTION AS A VEHICLE TO FACILITATE FACULTY-STUDENT ADVISEMENT

William B. Miller and David E. Hutchins

There has been an increasing concern developing in the area of faculty-student advisement on college campuses. Suggestions for improving student advisement have included the use of paraprofessionals (Baxter, 1970; Bonar, 1971; Brown, 1972; Delworth, Sherwood, & Casaburri, 1974) and systematic selection of faculty members to serve as advisers (Koile, 1955; Dautch, 1972; MacAleese, 1974, 1975). Bonar (1976) outlined a number of guidelines for successful replication of a paraprofessional advisement program including a centralized facility, regular hours, and extensive record-keeping. While ideas such as Bonar's may be highly desirable, many colleges and universities may find such suggestions beyond the scope of practicality and/or at odds with their philosophy of education. In her article on faculty advising, Moore (1976) suggested that although the college's expectations, emphases, and procedures may vary among institutions, the faculty advising system should link the academic program to student personnel services. This article describes the application of group techniques to an advisement system that links student personnel services, faculty in the academic program, and students.

This project was initiated during the fall semester, 1976, in order to improve student advisement at a small, private liberal arts college. There were several factors on campus which made it desirable to experiment with the faculty-student advisement system. First, faculty were untrained in the advising process. Prior to the experiment, advising had been done on an individual basis with each new freshman assigned to a particular faculty member. Contacts were left to the student and faculty member

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and typically would focus primarily on academic planning and course selection with perhaps a minimum of attention being given to the student's personal and social goals. While there were no systematic records kept to indicate exactly how the traditional advising was done, it is likely that the advisement varied in quality and frequency of contact as a function of the particular adviser and student. Second, there were limited resources: no central facility for advisement and no regular hours or extensive record-keeping procedures as suggested by Bonar (1976). Finally, because there was no formal counseling center or central facility, it became necessary to consider ways of dealing with students in non-traditional ways and to extend the role of the faculty adviser.

METHOD

A letter from the Dean of Students' office was sent to 65 faculty advisers inviting them to become involved in a non-traditional freshman group advisement program. Twenty-eight faculty from a wide range of disciplines, and varying considerably in age, rank, and experience in working with students, indicated interest in the program. Two groups of faculty, 14 each, were selected by random methods to participate in an experimental and control group. For the experimental treatment (group advisement) there were 6 females and 8 males; in the control group (traditional advisement) there were 4 females and 10 males.

Group Advisement Preparation

Among the goals of advisement training was the desire to build group interaction skills on the part of faculty members in addition to

improving the student advisement process. Prior to the initiation of classes in the fall, 1976, the 14 faculty selected for the group advisement process were involved in 8 hours of training which included an intensive 4 hour group experience led by a professional facilitator. In this session faculty shared their concerns about working with groups of students and potential problems which might come up. In addition, faculty members learned basic group techniques including how to initiate a group, how to avoid getting involved in a group situation beyond their personal competence, how to make referrals, advisement goals, strategies, and means of assessing progress. Training thus involved an experiential process of going through a micro-group training laboratory coupled with plenty of time for questions and discussion relating to practical "how-to-do-it" aspects regarding group work with college students.

Because a review of literature had suggested the potential of using peer helpers, paraprofessionals were also trained to be co-advisers with faculty members in the group advising process. A workshop similar to the one for faculty was held for the peer helpers. Peer helpers were upperclass students selected by the student personnel staff from students who initially volunteered for the project. They had an appropriate combination of academic success (B grade point average or above), demonstrated effective social skills, and were involved in campus co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. These individuals also received \$200 scholarships as a token of appreciation for their work with the freshman group advisement program.

A four hour joint meeting with the 14 faculty and 14 peer helpers from the experimental group was held. This meeting included content such

as how faculty and peer helpers could work together, how to involve students in groups, and how to use the group process to assist students in adjusting to the college environment, academic procedures, interpersonal and social concerns, etc. Finally, all faculty from the college and peer helpers were involved in approximately 8 hours of regular fall orientation meetings.

Students

Two hundred eighty incoming freshman students had been matched as far as possible into equivalent experimental and control groups prior to arriving on campus. Methods of matching students included the use of College Board scores, economic background, size of home town, high school grades, and interests. Once assigned to the experimental or control group, students were then randomly assigned to advisers. There were 28 groups of 10 students each or a total of 140 students assigned to the group advisement faculty and 140 students assigned to the traditional advisement faculty.

GROUP ADVISEMENT PROCEDURES

Faculty and their peer helpers met with students about 15 times during the academic year. Typically there were more meetings (twice monthly) at the beginning of the school term when the importance of the group would be expected to make the most difference to the new freshmen in assisting in their adjustment to college. While there was no consistent format or frequency of group meetings, several elements appeared across all groups. (1) Groups met in residence hall lounges rather than in faculty offices. (2) Students were often the initiators of group meetings with faculty. (3) In many cases such meetings were held in the campus cafe-

teria where all students ate. (4) Faculty invited students from their advisement groups to informal meetings in their homes and typically served snacks in the process. (5) Content in the group meetings involved sharing of many kinds of personal, social, and educational concerns; e.g., "What should I do about possibly dropping Spanish?"; "I'm having trouble getting along with my roommate"; "I really don't know what I want to do with my life"; or "This business course I'm taking is driving me up a wall." Since there was no formal counseling center on campus, faculty and peer helpers had been trained to deal with many kinds of student concerns. There was encouragement to discuss students' personal, social, and educational concerns which were appropriate to the nature of the group.

RESULTS

Selected results of this study are seen in Table 1 which illustrates data for 2, 6, and 9 month periods of time following the initiation of group procedures for freshman advising. For the experi-

Insert Table 1 about here

mental group of students, after 9 months in the group advisement program, there were 44.5% fewer course changes, 62.5% fewer room changes, 61.2% fewer disciplinary referrals, 75% fewer suspensions from college, and 78.2% less residence hall damage reported by the maintenance staff (students in the experimental group were located in specific sections of residence halls). It is important to note that major changes in all five categories

Table 1

Selected Results of the Faculty-Student Group Advisement Program

Specific Variables	2 Months*		6 Months		9 Months		9 Month Percentage Reduction: Exp. vs. Control Group
	Exp	Con	Exp	Con	Exp	Con	
A. Course Changes	12	44	34	66	40	72	44.5% Fewer
B. Room Changes	2	19	11	31	15	40	62.5% Fewer
C. Disciplinary Referrals	3	14	21	68	31	80	61.2% Fewer
D. Suspensions from College	0	2	0	2	1	4	75.0% Fewer
E. Residence Hall Damage	\$65	\$195	\$140	\$675	\$230	\$1055	78.2% Less

* Exp = Experimental Students

Con = Control Students

were observed within 2 months after the project was initiated and these changes continued throughout the academic year.

While not regarded as "hard data," the following observations about faculty and students seem worthwhile to note. There were no faculty "dropouts" from the group advisement program. All 14 faculty in the experimental group expressed a desire to continue with the group approach the following year, even though they had the option of returning to the more traditional methods of advisement. Although no solicitations for additional faculty were made, six additional faculty members volunteered to participate in the group advisement process. Student enrollment in selected courses taught by faculty who were group advisers increased over previous enrollments for these classes. The faculty "grapevine" indicated that the group advisement was a positive experience and more satisfying than the more limited contacts and content of traditional advisement.

Students involved in the group advisement process praised the method. Peer helpers were positive in their comments about the group experience and elected to return the following year. (This was also found to be an excellent recruiting device for Resident Assistants--a more lucrative position for upperclass students.) Student participants felt they learned some good human relations skills and were able to "see" both student and faculty points of view on many issues. Finally, peer helpers also felt more comfortable referring other students to faculty participating in the group approach because of more personal knowledge of and exposure to these faculty advisers.

Related Elements

One of the unforeseen results of this project had to do with

freshman participation in the winter fraternity and sorority rush. During the last five years, the numbers of students who typically "rushed" Greek organizations had remained steady or increased slightly. During the winter quarter, the numbers of students who signed up for rush dropped by about 20%. Presumably, the reason for this was associated with the fact that many students (in the experimental group) had already established a group identity; thus, many of the personal and social relationships traditionally developed through Greek life had already been formed .

Another element associated with the project became apparent only after examining enrollment data for the following (1977) fall semester. During the previous five years the enrollment of students for their sophomore year had remained constant. However, in 1977, 46 more sophomores than in the past showed up for fall registration; of these, 90% had been participants in the faculty-student group advisement project.

DISCUSSION

The faculty-student group advisement project with freshman students appears to be highly successful in terms of student, peer helper, and faculty reactions. This project illustrates how the student personnel staff can be instrumental in involving academic faculty in the growth and development of the "whole" student. A variety of faculty from differing disciplines, age groups, and experiences, can improve their student advisement activities through the effective use of group procedures.

It seems reasonable that similar procedures could be adapted by a variety of colleges and institutions which have similar student develop-

ment goals. The procedures used do not appear to be limited to only a small college setting. The group advisement project illustrates that there can be more time for student personnel professionals to concentrate on more positive, developmental activities, since a number of disciplinary problems appear to be reduced as a function of the effective application of group procedures to freshman students. It seems reasonable that when students in the experimental group made room and course changes, such changes would more likely be made on a rational, rather than arbitrary basis. Students learned to confront issues, talk about alternatives, and solicit group feedback rather than make spontaneous, capricious decisions.

Group support, coupled with input from a faculty member and peer helper, appears to have a number of benefits outside the purely "advisement" function. Group support at the initiation of a student's college experience appears to assist in the student's positive adjustment to the college setting and provide a helping environment during a critical transition period between parent domination and increasing individual responsibility. Such a group could be the basis for a kind of on-going orientation during the freshman year and help to encourage responsible problem-solving behavior among students. The use of the group process as a vehicle in which students and faculty can model effective problem-solving behavior would appear to warrant continued experimentation in order to assess specific ways in which the group process can contribute to student development in the college setting.

SUMMARY

This article described an experiment using group procedures as

a means of training faculty members and student peer-helpers to conduct student advisement in a college setting with entering freshmen. Results suggested that the group process can assist in overcoming certain limitations of more traditional faculty-student advisement activities by expanding the range of topics and concerns dealt with, utilizing the group process as a partial substitute for professional counseling services, and providing a basic reference group in which students can share ideas, feelings and concerns before they become crises. Finally, group advisement procedures were seen as a method of integrating the student personnel and academic functions of the college for the overall benefit of student, faculty, and student personnel administrators.

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